

DEPARTMENT of the INTERIOR

news release

FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE

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CRITICAL HABITAT FOR COLORADO RIVER SQUAWFISH PROPOSED

Critical habitat for the Colorado River squawfish, largest minnow in North America, has been proposed for more than 600 miles of rivers in eastern Utah and western Colorado, Associate Director Keith M. Schreiner of the Interior Department's U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service announced today.

The squawfish historically reached a length of 6 feet and weighed up to 80 pounds. But catches in recent years have been less than 3 feet long, which indicates changes in the population structure.

The critical habitat proposal, published in the September 14, 1978, Federal Register, lists 623 miles of the Colorado, Green, Yampa, and Gunnison Rivers for this endangered fish.

The identification of critical habitat alerts Federal agencies to where endangered species and their critical habitats may be found. According to Section 7 of the Endangered Species Act of 1973, all Federal agencies are required to ensure that no action authorized, funded, or carried out by them will result in the destruction or adverse modification of habitats determined to be critical to the species' survival.

No specific actions will be affected unless they are determined to be detrimental to the survival of the species. Private and State facilities where no Federal funding or authorization are involved would not be affected by such a determination.

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"Presently the Fish and Wildlife Service knows of no Federal projects under construction which would be limited by the critical habitat proposal," Schreiner said. "However, there are a number of proposed Federal projects that could pose potential conflicts. Most of them are water development projects in the Colorado River Basin. In addition, certain grazing practices and aspects of oil shale development could pose conflicts. We are now in consultation with various agencies to ensure that their planned actions do not hurt the species."

The historic range of the Colorado squawfish was the Colorado River and its main tributaries in Arizona, Utah, Nevada, California, New Mexico, Wyoming, and Colorado, where it provided a valuable source of food for Indians and settlers because of availability in quantity. An indication of early squawfish abundance was the use of them as fertilizer when they become stranded in irrigation ditches during spring spawning migrations.

Dams on the Colorado and its major tributaries, and resulting changes in environmental conditions, have eliminated the species from the lower basin States and severely reduced populations in the upper basin. The species evolved in the turbulent, muddy Colorado River and seems unable to adjust to the changed habitat that results from river impoundment. Competition from introduced exotic species also have hurt the squawfish population.

Persons having information which could affect this rulemaking should write the Director, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (OES), Washington, D.C. 20240. All comments received by December 13, 1978, will be considered.

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